

The Bridges We Write

By Dennis Payton Knight

As writers, we are in the business of building bridges. Every sentence we write, even if it is imperfectly structured, is a bridge from one point to another. “I love you,” the simplest of sentences, spans oceans with only a subject, a verb, and an object.

We join Hemingway, Dickens, Joyce, Twain, Thurber, Angelou, Orwell and so many before us, beside our contemporaries of today, to build bridges connecting us to the past, the present and the future. We write bridges to teach, we write them to entertain, we write them to persuade, we write them to court, we write them to laugh, we write them to dread, we write them to dream, we write them to mourn, and we write them to celebrate.

Even in the act of creating fiction from the thinnest air, we are writing bridges. Maya Angelou said it well, “I don’t know about lying for novelists. I look at some of the great novelists, and I think the reason they are great is that they’re telling the truth. The fact is they’re using made-up names, made-up people, made-up places, and made-up times, but they’re telling the truth about the human being—what we are capable of, what makes us lose, laugh, weep, fall down, and gnash our teeth and wring our hands and kill each other and love each other.”

We can imbue the bridges we write with gargoyles and ornamentation, or we can engineer marvels with the simplicity of the Golden Gate Bridge. Mark Twain had it right about writing when he said, “A successful book is not made of what is in it, but what is left out of it.”

Twain said a couple of other things to prove his point; “Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.” Then he counseled us to “Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very;’ your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.” Beyond spurning the very word “very”, he didn’t think well of adjectives in general and suggested we kill them all.

The bridges we write can be powerful enough to take us to war, or wise enough to lead us to peace. The bridges we write can be apprehensive, suggesting worries and problems, or they can be secure enough to present solutions. They can be bridges to perdition, they can be bridges to heaven.

We can be obsessed. Often, we are creating the structures we call bridges in our minds without even a pen or keyboard at our disposal. James Thurber related the inclination this way, “I never quite know when I’m not writing. Sometimes my wife comes up to me at a party and says, ‘Dammit, Thurber, stop writing.’ She usually catches me in the middle of a paragraph.

“Or my daughter will look up from the dinner table and ask, ‘Is he sick?’ ‘No,’ my wife says, ‘he’s writing something.’”